

Notes on Crises

IX. INTERNAL SUMMITRY

A characteristic of the policymaking process prior to or in the earliest stages of some crises, and often later in their most intense phase, is that it is decisionmaking by principals: principals isolated to an unusual degree from their own staffs and from other influences that are normally effective in less secret or less urgent decision processes. It is possible to indicate some of the reasons for the relative autonomy, in crisis situations, of the highest office holders (say, of the level of Assistant Secretary or above). from their normal advisers, assistants, and subordinate bureaus. On the consequences of freeing principals from their staffs, one must at this point be more speculative. However, the frequency which such "internal summitry" -- in which major policies, both initiatives, declarations, or responses are/framed and "staffed" by individual heads of departments and the President himself, without benefit of systematic reviews of background material or interchanges between departments at the staff level -- are followed by major surprises, international confusion, and intense crises, is ominously suggestive. The impression may be misleading, but there is no doubt that the phenomenon deserves study.

First, let us identify some instances. [REDACTED]

SUEZ

Both Robert Murphy and Robert Bowie report that Dulles' decision to withdraw the offer of support for the Aswan Dam was undertaken without any consultation or forewarning of them or their colleagues in the State Department. (To what extent Dulles' action was discussed with the President

or even even had been the subject of long reflection in Dulles' own mind, is, inevitably, indeterminate in the accounts of Murphy and Bowie, and of others. What is clear is that the decision was reached without the usual participation of high-level staffs.) On the British side, the military operations envisioned were held extraordinarily closely; the full Cabinet was apparently not let in until the last moment, all prior decisions having been made by [REDACTED] Eden with a small sub-group of the Cabinet. Throughout the summer of 1956, the intent and immediate objectives of Dulles; various improvisations -- for example, the Suez Canal Users Association -- were never explained to subordinates, even on the level of Murphy. (Whether this degree of obscurity was unusual for Dulles in relation to his assistants, I am not sure; perhaps not.) At the same time, there was a more explicit understanding between Eisenhower and Dulles on the tactics and goals in the situation ^{than} [REDACTED] was apparent to the Allies and public; Murphy [REDACTED] asserts that Eisenhower preferred in this instance as in others to conceal his own degree of involvement; and to let Dulles be the front runner for a policy which was, in fact, directed by the President.

SKYBOLT

The basic decision to drop Skybolt from the 1964 budget was reached by McNamara in August 1962, after consultation with a very small number of staff advisers, not including, for example, anyone from ISA. (McNamara would dispute that this was a firm decision at this stage, stressing [REDACTED] its tentative and contingent nature. Certainly it required approval by

the Secretary of State and the President. It was also recognized that a way would have to be found to compensate the British, and the possibility that political difficulties would prove insurmountable ^{was} doubtless imagined. Nevertheless, it seems clear that if McNamara were a betting man, the odds he would have offered that funds for Skybolt would not, in the end, be included in the 1964 budget, would have taken a great leap upward between July and September of 1962. That comes close to ^{being} what it means to make a decision.) The fact that this was even a serious possibility -- that is, that the cut was a more serious possibility than it had been in previous years -- was not communicated to the White House until some time later, nor to staffs in ISA or State until later still. After the basic policy and tactics had been determined by the President, McNamara, Rusk, and Bundy meeting together, and in ^{direct} communication with Thorneycroft and Macmillan, there was a flurry of staff work on alternatives in ISA and State. But ^{their} ~~the~~ evaluation of these proposals ^{by the principals} was not granted ~~by the principals~~ to these staffs, nor were the outlines of the further alternatives which the principals themselves thought more realistic. On the British side, Thorneycroft and Macmillan concealed both from the Cabinet and from their staffs (aside from their closest confidantes) information they had been given that the United States was close to a decision on cutting Skybolt; thus, no ~~staff~~ staff work at all was done in London on alternative responses to the situation. The eventual compromise was negotiated at Nassau between the President and the Prime Minister directly, ^{in a conference at which very few staff assistants were present,} along the lines of a solution which the U.S. principals had envisioned from the start, but which had been reflected scarcely at all in staff planning or considerations on either side of the Atlantic.

~~This is~~ hardly any U.S. staff members were present at all at Nassau, which had not earlier been planned as a major policymaking session.

BAY OF PIGS

As is well known by now, participation in the decision process leading to the aborted invasion of Cuba in April 1961 was limited to a degree that was extraordinary even for clandestine operations. Allegedly, even the Undersecretary of State, Chester Bowles, who would normally have been involved in monitoring such an operation, was bypassed, as were members of the intelligence community, ^yand of ISA, [REDACTED] and of the JCS, who might on other occasions have been included.

THE CUBAN MISSILE CRISIS

The device of the "Ex Comm" has received great publicity. From October 15 to 22, a group of heads of departments and a few assistant secretaries did not only their own staff work, but ^{and} their own typing; they did not pass the information on developments in Cuba or on the internal policy considerations on even to those trusted assistants whom they normally would tell in situations when they had been ordered "not to tell anything to anyone." Although there was fervid and massive participation by [REDACTED] both political and military staffs in the subsequent week, a significant amount of the information coming to the Ex Comm and the discussions taking place within the Ex Comm were not shared, even with the closest of assistants. Moreover, the same isolation from staff characterized the earlier phase in August and September when the President and his closest advisers confronted the information on the Soviet "defensive" buildup in Cuba and considered what to do about it.

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In these situations two distinct aspects are notable: (a) the fact that Cabinet-level officers ^{are} heavily involved, as individuals, in the earliest initiation of proposals, in developing them, criticizing them, and estimating their consequences; ^{normal} (b) participants in the policymaking process other than the Cabinet-level officers were virtually excluded from the process, leaving the field entirely to their bosses. [REDACTED]

The predominant reason is [REDACTED] a need for extreme secrecy. This secrecy may relate to intelligence (various intervals between August and November 1962), internal debate in the planning process (October 15-28, 1962), or communication between allies (Suez, Skybolt) or with enemies (October 1962); ^{it} ~~this secrecy~~ may be aimed against disclosure to an enemy, or an ally, one's own public, or the publics of allies or enemies, other parts of one's own government (Congress, other departments), or from one's own staff (a significant feature in the Skybolt episode, particularly in State). [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

In the case of clandestine operations such as the Bay of Pigs, the need for secrecy is evident. In other cases, where the aim is to confront an ally or an enemy with a fait accompli (the British and French at Suez, the United States in October 14-22, 1961, McNamara and the President vis-a-vis the Air Force and Congress in the Skybolt episode), the need for secrecy is likewise obvious. Moreover, it may be necessary to deny information to some parties -- [REDACTED] staffs, departments, Congress or the public, or allies -- whose participation would otherwise be desired, simply because of fear that they would leak the information to third parties. Certainly it is not only leaks, direct

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CRISIS TOPICS

HIDDEN HISTORY

Almost no studies of crisis situations exist which are adequate to give an understanding of the sequence of decisions and events, in terms of the motives of the high level participants, the ~~the nature~~ nature and time-flow of information to them, the events and consideration have captured their attention, the alternative policies they considered and the analyses and evaluation of these alternatives, their uncertainties, apprehensions, hopes and expectations. Few if any students have had access to data bearing directly on these matters even for the US side of the international crises, let alone for the Allied or Soviet bloc decision processes (although there are studies, both public and private, whose authors seem ignorant of the inadequacies of the data actually available to them.) We may consider some reasons for this, the extent for this state of affairs, the extent to which it means that some of its consequences, and the extent to which it may be remediable.

A great deal of the relevant information prior to the outbreak of a crisis will typically come through clandestine intelligence channels. It is therefore subject to special/clearances and to special handling. Researchers without these clearances will not, typically, know what they do not know; they will be ignorant even of the existence of such procedures and these sorts of data, and the experience of past studies shows that gaps in the data available to them or the puzzling features in its apparent patterns do not, in practice, lead researchers to suspect the existence of large

Exposure of details gives way to a critique of the process and quality of decision-making. Leaders have nothing to gain from this. They will get no credit for "good decision-making" if the results were bad; but they will be blamed for "bad" decision-making even if the results were good.

amounts of data to which they had not received access. This leads them to both highly distorted impressions of the ^{to}available to high level decision makers prior to enduring the crisis, and hence wrong guesses as to the decision makers' expectations, apprehensions, ^{uncertainties}and immediate goals, and to unwarranted ^{confidence}constants by the researchers in the reliability of their conclusions. The same results have followed from denying researchers access to certain other kinds of closely held data.

A. A good deal of communication internal to a given department is stamped "eyes only" for the head of that department or for the immediate addressee, or is otherwise highly restricted in dissemination. These messages of memos tend to be segregated and handled separately and it seems difficult for a researcher from a given department to get access to such material from some other department.

B. White House internal memos and directives receive special handling and are particularly hard to get at. This is particularly serious for the study of crises, since presidential decision is centrally important in crisis situations.

C. A great deal of important during crises is transacted on the telephone, leaving no trail (or a sporadic trail of telcons, which are particularly closely held).

D. ~~CONFIDENTIAL~~ For a variety of reasons discussed elsewhere, staffs in various departments may not be as well informed of the information available to their superiors or their superiors' preoccupations as is customary; therefore, interviews with even the closest staff assistants,

~~SECRET~~ and written staffed support, may be less reliable than usual as a guide to the thinking of high level decision makers.

E. Even among the highest level of decision makers, the pressure of events and the extreme privacy of some of the planning or international negotiations may keep individuals from having a comprehensive view of the information available for the actions under consideration; again, even these cabinet level officers may not know what they do not know, and have a quite distorted view of their colleague's activities or presidential intentions. This limits their value as sources.

F. The very existence of a crisis creates some presumption or suspicion of governmental failure: In predicting, in preparing and planning, in deterring or preventing unfavorable events. This creates from the outset of the crisis a defensive attitude toward examination of the governmental decision making process. Even where a thoroughly full examination of all the information available to the government and all of its responses would absolve the administration from any taint of failure, there is reason to fear that the partial

G. (not mentioned earlier) THE DOMESTIC POLITICAL CONSIDERATIONS
INFLUENCING HIGH-LEVEL CALCULATIONS

(These considerations enter ^{inter} ~~the~~ national security decisionmaking mainly at cabinet and presidential levels; they are not reflected in lower level staff work, and in fact are not very well understood at levels below the highest; thus, this whole dimension is particularly affected by the relative inaccessibility of data on the highest levels of decision-making, and moreover it is relatively closely held even within that highest level.)

H. DATA THAT IS RECOGNIZED TO BE OR THAT HAS BECOME POLITICALLY SENSITIVE
BECAUSE OF ITS RELATION TO:

(1) Charges that have been made by domestic opponents or critics, allies or enemies;

(2) Possible criticism or indications of failure, recklessness, mal-adroitness, indecision or irresponsibility;

(3) Indications that potentially controversial or unpopular alternatives were considered or advocated at all;

(4) Indications of misrepresentation ~~for~~ concealment by administration leaders.

(5) Data that would discredit specific individuals within the administration

(6) Evidence of strong controversy, disunity or indecision within the administration.

In some cases, these gaps in the data available to the researcher are recognizable by him as holes and he can make allowance for them in his interpretation, inferences, conclusions, and subsequent searches for data. However, in a number of cases mentioned above, it is even more common for the [REDACTED] secrecy to be thoroughly effective in [REDACTED] concealing from a researcher -- even a relatively experienced one, with some special clearances, and partial access to high level and sensitive material -- what it is that he does not know. The results, as mentioned earlier, are mistaken inferences, ^{misdirected} [REDACTED] focus and warped emphases, distorted or untenable conclusions, and unwarranted confidence. Moreover, the researcher in this state of mind is unlikely to segregate his inferences sharply from his direct presentation of evidence, for his more solidly based from his more speculative inferences, or to reveal for the reader the exact limitations of his access to data. This makes it difficult or impossible even for a highly experienced, [REDACTED] sophisticated, and knowledgeable reader systematically to complement the researcher's account with his own special knowledge of [REDACTED] sensitive information, or to make allowances in interpreting the researcher's conclusions for [REDACTED] what the researcher probably did not know (since the researcher has not [REDACTED] made it easy to infer exactly what it is he does not know). Hence, such a [REDACTED] ^{person} is not likely to ^{make} [REDACTED] the effort of trying to learn from the researcher's account after all.

In short, the history of crisis constitutes hidden history. It is to be found neither in public history books nor in classified internal [REDACTED] accounts. One consequence of this is that the background knowledge of past crises which a high level decisionmaker brings to his job when he first arrives is ~~was~~ derived from histories, newspapers, public discussions, and his own experience in other positions for the government -- almost certain

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significantly and to be/systematically deficient, distorted and misleading. There is no easy, systematic way for him to modify or improve this understanding of "past experience." Yet his decision in current crises -- especially those early ones that occur before he has built up much direct, intimate experience of his own -- will surely reflect the influence of these general considerations based allegedly on past experience, in addition to the influence of current information and his understanding of current processes and operations. Not all high level decisionmakers would avail themselves of an opportunity to improve their education relating to Great Crises of the Past. But at present it would be almost impossible for an individual newcomer (for instance, to the Presidency or cabinet level or ~~as a~~ a deputy or assistant secretaryship) to do so, even if he wanted to. This deficiency in the education of presidents and their closest advisors may have important implications for the miscalculation ^{and} ~~a~~ risk in the early months or years of new administrations or a partial.....

There is reason to fear that the partial probes that are more likely, and likely to be made on a selective, trouble-seeking basis, will lend damaging support to charges and criticisms. Thus, even when the outcome of the crisis is generally applauded, there is likely to be ~~an~~ an unsympathetic attitude in the highest of the administration toward a thoroughly comprehensive study of the decisionmaking process. Moreover, on the practical side, evidence tending to suggest or support charges of failure or of contemplation of ^{and} controversial policy may be systematically destroyed, or segregated/closely guarded: even when the impression based on such evidence would in fact be false or grossly misleading. (Thus, this ~~will~~ "suppression of evidence" cannot be taken as proof that the allegations are correct.) Thus, certain memos, estimates, files of staff work, directives, and messages may be systematically

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hunted down and destroyed or segregated, leaving little or no trace; moreover, ^{those} though with knowledge of these "data subject to misinterpretation" may be formally ~~sworn to secrecy~~ sworn to secrecy or may intuitively suppress all mention of the sensitive data. Again, actual past experience of these studies indicate that these measures of secrecy can be very effective; policy studies based upon interviews, even long after the event/ and with participants who were generally very forthcoming even with classified data, reveal that certain whole episodes or the mention of the decisionmaking process had systematically and effectively been suppressed/ by all of the interviewees. (A good example are the studies by Paul Hammond and Warren Schilling of the decisionmaking process that lead to NFS 68.) ~~_____~~

I. A great deal of the decisionmaking was conducted in face to face sessions among the highest level participants, and is not reflected in writing at all. Thus, what the researcher ~~sees~~ sees most extensively is the inflow of memoranda, estimates and recommendations from various department and advisors to the high level executive councils; he sees least evidence relating to considerations and other information which the high level participants themselves bring to the discussion, the factors upon which they focus, ~~there~~ weighing of motives and _____,

J. There is a good deal of direct, deliberate misrepresentation by administration leaders during and after the crisis of the matters they are considering: their information, motions, alternatives considered, etc. In part this is to defend against possible charges of failure we have mentioned; or it may reflect inability, for reasons of security, to mention some of the evidence available to the administration from clandestine or diplomatic channels; or it may aim to win acceptance of administration policy, handling, or lack of consultation, from the public or from the allies; or it may be

intended to avoid prejudicing the ~~negotiations~~ negotiations, or upsetting agreements or a balance of tension with the opponent. In any case, the public declarations muddy the water for the researcher, and even more importantly create areas of secrecy to be defended by the administration against disclosure, this leading to further restrictions on data and to a restrictive attitude toward investigation.

To summarize, there are specific types of data essential to the understanding of crisis behavior to which past studies have not, on the whole, had adequate access:

- (a) presidential files
- (b) intelligence data requiring special clearances
- (c) interdepartmental files; where the researcher is "an insider" of those other than his own department
~~of those other than his own department~~
- (d) "eyes only" or specially restricted data within given departments.
- (e) data relating to the personal decisionmaking of the highest level figures in any given department, and of the direct advisors to the President, and the President himself.
- (f) (not mentioned earlier) certain highly private communications, outside normal diplomatic channels, between allied or opposing heads of state,
- (g)